

## **Commemorating Schilder: Have We Learned Anything Yet?**

by Theodore Plantinga

Christians in my part of the ecclesiastical world have asked themselves, off and on, what to do about that Schilder business. What is meant by "that Schilder business," of course, is the nasty split that ran through the Dutch Reformed world in the Netherlands in the 1940 and which then transplanted itself to Canada and, to some degree, to certain other areas as well where there are churches with close ties to the old country.

Of course one would like to heal the split, but it did not appear that the good will was present in sufficient measure on the two sides for such a thing to take place. If there could be no full mending of what was ruptured, at least some academic and theological discussion was called for.

An occasion, a good opportunity, came in our decade. It happened that 1990 was the hundredth anniversary of Schilder's birth. In that year and the ones that followed, various publications appeared -- mainly in Dutch, some in English -- which tried to present Schilder to a new generation that knew him mainly as the one who stood at the center of a painful battle. I tried to contribute to this process myself by translating Rudolf Van Reest's book on Schilder and adding a good deal of material to it in the form of supplementary chapters and explanatory footnotes. [NOTE 1] The latest such English-language publication to come to my attention is a collection of separate pieces, some of which were originally speeches delivered in 1990 in Burlington, Ontario, as part of the Schilder commemoration. The book is entitled *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder*. [NOTE 2]

The essay of greatest interest to me was "Schilder on Christ and Culture," by N.H. Gootjes. In this discussion we hear some interesting things about Schilder's relation to the thought of Abraham Kuyper, about Schilder's position over the years on the question of Christians cooperating with Christians in other churches, and also about the harsh criticism of Schilder made by O.

Noordmans, a theologian who is not as well-known in North America as he should be. (For some of this material, one must look in the notes, which come at the end of each piece.) Also well worth reading is Jelle Faber's contribution, entitled "Klaas Schilder's Life and Work." Not only is Faber himself a theologian with keen insight; he also belongs to the generation of those who knew Schilder personally and studied under him at Kampen.

Schilder was deeply committed to church unity. Van Reest's book on him stressed this notion in its title: "Opdat zij allen een zijn." This is of course a quotation from our Lord's prayer in John 17 -- "that they may all be one" (vs. 21) The title of the English translation does not preserve this phrase but points to the same emphasis: *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*.

Because of this emphasis, an appropriate way to commemorate Schilder would be to foster unity, harmony and reconciliation between churches. This I myself attempted to do, in concert with others of the same conviction, but with little to show for it. There is a story here, and it begs to be told on some other occasion. In brief, efforts were stymied because immediate church union hopes in the hearts of some led a number of people who could have been involved in the process to overlook the amount of healing and reconciliation that would be needed before a genuine and lasting union would be possible. I myself hoped especially that honest repentance for the excesses of the struggle of the 1940s would now be forthcoming. From time to time I was told it was too soon. I am deeply disappointed over what failed to happen, although I do not wish to minimize the changing of minds and hearts and attitudes in individuals which did go on.

The struggle in the Christian Reformed denomination complicated the picture. I myself wanted to see the Christian Reformed and Canadian Reformed churches bury the hatchet, so to speak, and find a new relationship to one another, a relationship that would also take sober account of the things that have transpired in recent decades. But some others hoped mainly for a good relationship and eventual union between the Canadian Reformed churches and the churches that were in the process of seceding from the Christian Reformed denomination. The latter churches, of course, have recently constituted themselves as a denomination using the label "United Reformed." The URC congregations seem willing to talk with other Calvinistic groups in their neighborhood, but Schilder's deep desire for church unity has not taken root among them. Instead I believe I see a North American pragmatic attitude toward the fact that there are quite a number of Calvinistic denominations holding to basically the same set of confessions. But I would emphasize that the future is open and that fine things may yet happen.

A third way to commemorate Schilder is through academic and church-historical reflection. I have not seen a lot of this going on -- at least, not outside the circles of those who follow Schilder and "the liberation" (more on this term later) in their church life. But one fine example of such reflection needs our attention here, namely, Richard Mouw's article "Learning from the `Splits': Some Reflections on Dutch Calvinist Diversity." [NOTE 3] The author of this article is not primarily or originally a churchman, although today he serves as president of Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California. Rather, his academic training is in philosophy (as is mine). His church background is Reformed Church of America, and then Christian Reformed. (For many years, he taught philosophy at Calvin College.) Today Mouw worships in a Presbyterian church. In his thinking on Schilder and the fragmentation of the Reformed world, we do not find the tendency toward personal defensiveness that occurs in so many other writers and commentators who are closely linked to one or another church group that played a role in the struggle.

As Mouw investigates the "splits," paying a good deal of attention to the 1940s struggle, he discerns three themes running through the Dutch Calvinist tendency toward division: "The first is an ecclesiastical governance issue; the second, a concern about the Reformed understanding of regeneration; and the third the tensions over the church's relationship to the larger culture" (p. 184). The first of these, he maintains, played a large role in the self-understanding of the "liberated" Reformed churches. I believe he is right about this; I have written elsewhere that it is the key issue in the struggle that led to their separate existence. [NOTE 4] The second has a great deal to do with the Free Reformed churches and their emphasis on experiential preaching and Christian living. (the Free Reformed, as they are called in North America, owe their separate existence not to a split in the ordinary sense but to the decision of their Dutch forefathers in 1892 to stay out of a church union.) And the third was central to the struggle that led to the separate existence of the churches called Protestant Reformed.

Mouw would like to see substantial discussion of these issues taking place; he wants to deal with "the actual theological content at stake in Dutch Calvinist diversity" (p. 184). The implication, of course, is that such debate has not taken place in the past. Is this a fair conclusion?

At the time of the battle, of course, the issues in a church struggle do get onto the table; afterward they seem to become topics that are out of bounds for polite discussion. The split or parting of ways has a considerable cost; people cannot easily countenance the prospect that they were wrong and that they ought to take a fresh look at such-and-such questions. Common grace (the 1924 issue)

may be an exception in Mouw's trio; the term is certainly invoked often in the Christian college world. But where, in the Christian Reformed world, would one find a thoughtful review of the 1924 Hoeksema controversy over common grace such that one could understand what was really at stake? To find out what happened in 1924, one must rely mainly on the writings of those who were expelled from the Christian Reformed denomination.

The closed subject that vexes me in particular is the first one mentioned by Mouw -- church governance. For a long time it appeared that there was really no doctrinal difference between the Canadian Reformed and Christian Reformed churches here in Canada. Why, then, should they remain separate? People would sometimes say that the Canadian Reformed churches, being smaller and newer, had no right to separate existence. But there *was* an unresolved issue, namely, church governance. To have dealt with that issue would have meant looking carefully at the issues in the 1940s struggle in the Netherlands, which was just what the Christian Reformed denomination did not wish to do, for peculiar reasons that have not been spelled out fully. (I have reviewed some of this history elsewhere.) [NOTE 5]

Mouw's conclusion is that "we ignore these issues at our theological and spiritual peril" (p. 195). He observes: "... the questions themselves are of crucial importance for maintaining a vital Calvinist pastoral ministry. If the ongoing debates about these matters can be given a pastoral focus, looking at the ways in which the Reformed community has generated diverse patterns of spiritual formation and pastoral care, perhaps some new lessons can be learned about the rich spiritual resources of the Reformed tradition" (p. 195).

Mouw's article is well worth reading. I wish there were many more pastors and professors who were willing and able to write in such a spirit about the things that divide us. But I know from experience that expressing sentiments sympathetic to the smaller, so-called breakaway denominations can easily lead to suspicion.

In concluding this essay on how Schilder might be commemorated, I want to suggest that terminology sometimes keeps us apart. A term that comes to mind for me as creating concrete difficulties is "the liberation," with its adjectival form "liberated." Now, "liberated" is a past participle, and in an earlier issue of *Myodicy* I have pointed to certain difficulties with past participle thinking. [NOTE 6] Liberated means, roughly speaking, free. I would rather speak of a Reformed church as free than as liberated.

The problem with the term has something to do with differences between the English and Dutch languages. We have passed through a number of 50th anniversaries lately. One of them was the anniversary of the liberation of 1944, which was when Schilder and company were freed from the tyranny of a synod that had exceeded its mandate and authority. Just one year later came another 50th anniversary of the liberation. What was meant in this second case was the liberation of the Netherlands from the heel of the Nazi oppressor. In much of the Netherlands, this concrete event took place in April or May of 1945, when Canadian troops chased the Nazis out. That great liberation was commemorated in grand style in 1995. Some of the Canadian soldiers went back and were hailed once again as heroes. Many Dutch immigrants to Canada (including my mother) also went back and participated in deeply moving ceremonies in which some of the original joy and gratitude for freedom restored was felt once again. There were also ceremonies here in Canada.

For many Canadian observers, this notion of the two great liberations -- one from the synod in 1944 and one from the Nazis in 1945 -- being placed terminologically on the same level is offensive. When reflecting on this matter, it helps to know a little Dutch, for in the Dutch language we have *two different terms* at play here. What happened in 1944 is referred to as the "vrijmaking," while the 1945 restoration is the "bevrijding." Once this linguistic fact sinks in, we come to see that no subtle parallel between the synod and the Nazis is intended here.

I had occasion to reflect on this linguistic distinction recently when a Dutch book with both of these words in its title came into my hands: *Van vrijmaking tot bevrijding*. [NOTE 7] An English title might be: "From the Liberation [i.e. the 1940s church struggle] to True Freedom." This book reflects not only on the struggle of the 1940s and its aftermath, but also on the late 1960s split in the ranks of the "liberated" churches. The book is made up of separate pieces by Aleid Schilder (daughter of the late Herman J. Schilder, an Old Testament professor at Kampen and the nephew of Klaas Schilder) and by Jan Veenhof (the son of Cornelis Veenhof, one of the leading figures in the struggle of the 1940s). Some things in this book will be found offensive by many Reformed believers, especially those connected with the "liberated" churches. Aleid Schilder is a topic all by herself. But the commentary on various events written by Jan Veenhof is worth reading. What the two (Veenhof and Schilder) have in common is a conviction that the disruptive events of the 1940s and 1960s were carried through at a great personal and psychological cost. I don't doubt it for a moment, which is all the more reason why we should work to heal the breach and seek reconciliation. The Bible says: Do it the same day, not fifty years

later. "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger."  
[Ephesians 4:26].

We have seen, then, that the Dutch term "vrijmaking" is not intended to transfer to the church struggle the emotions that accompanied the overthrow of Nazi oppression. Even so, I maintain that the term "the liberation," as used in English today, represents an awkward obstacle to reconciliation and eventual reunion. I'm not suggesting that the term can be dropped altogether; rather, in the spirit of Mouw's article, with its thesis that church governance has a lot to do with the lamentable splits, I am suggesting that the matter of "the liberation," as my Canadian Reformed friends like to call it, or the struggle of the 1940s, as I prefer to say, needs a thorough airing. And even if it were to get that airing, it would still be a potential obstacle to fellowship and discussion. I have noticed often that people who are members of "liberated" churches speak fairly freely of "the liberation," while people in other churches avoid using the phrase and look for some substitute like "the church struggle of the 1940s." What we need is an ecumenical church history that covers the 1940s thoroughly, a church history that provides us with a vocabulary we can use to review and discuss the events of that time without prematurely committing ourselves to any particular interpretation of the historical import of those events. We may have learned a good deal from the era of Schilder commemoration in the early 1990s, but this particular lesson has not yet sunk in.

To their credit, members of "liberated" churches show plenty of willingness to enter into a discussion of the events of the 1940s. But their counterparts in other denominations seem, by and large, too polite to embark on such a discussion: "Let's not talk about it; it will only lead to quarreling."

Talk may indeed lead to quarreling, but perhaps an honest quarrel is needed every now and then within the context of a covenant relationship. Didn't the Lord also have a quarrel with his people and accuse them often of being unfaithful to him? (See, for example, the book of Malachi and Amos.) And so I would like to commemorate Schilder by dealing honestly and substantively with the issues that arise from his work and career. Have we been faithful to *our* covenant obligations? Perhaps we need a quarrel to clear the air.

## NOTES

[NOTE 1] *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*. Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1990.

[NOTE 2] Ed. J. Geertsema. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1995. Paperback, 137 pages.

[NOTE 3] Published in *Calvin Theological Journal*, Vol. 31 (1996), pp. 182-195.

[NOTE 4] See *Seeking Our Brothers in the Light: A Plea for Reformed Ecumenicity*, ed. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1992), pp. 29-31.

[NOTE 5] See *Seeking Our Brothers in the Light*, pp. 33-71.

[NOTE 6] See "Mission Accomplished? Some Dangers in Past Participle Thinking, " in the December 1996 issue of *Myodicy*.

[NOTE 7] Baarn: Ten Have, 1995. The two authors listed are Jan Veenhof and Aleid Schilder.